

Spain's Partido Popular government is reverting to Francoist type over Gibraltar, to the detriment of all.

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Tensions have risen between Spain and Gibraltar following the implementation of additional border checks between the two territories by the Spanish government. Gareth Stockey notes that border restrictions are likely to have a damaging effect on both Gibraltar and neighbouring Spanish communities. He argues that the Spanish government's actions represent a break from the conciliatory stance pursued by the previous Zapatero government, and are more in keeping with the traditional 'Francoist' approach of using the Gibraltar issue to divert public and media attention away from domestic problems.



The most recent diplomatic spat over Gibraltar has now entered its third week. In recent years the vicissitudes of this long-running dispute have encompassed everything from airspace to territorial waters, from telephone lines to Gibraltar's proposed [membership of UEFA](#). But the recent renewal of tension has centred on the Gibraltar-Spain border, where travellers and commuters have found themselves waiting for hours in long traffic queues, owing to the enforcement of much more rigorous customs checks on the part of Spanish border officials. Britain and Spain show [no signs of backing down](#) from their respective positions, and in the meantime the residents who live and work on either side of this contested frontier suffer the consequences.

Spain's use of the frontier to bully, cajole or simply irritate Gibraltar is hardly unprecedented, and has met with predictable nods of understanding in the [Gibraltarian press](#). The move sits neatly with a commonly held view – and one shared by most who know anything about 'the Rock' in Britain – that Spain will push its 300-year-old claim to the territory at any opportunity, and that the border is the most frequently used weapon in the Spanish armoury.

In fact, using the border to 'strangle' Gibraltar is a relatively recent phenomenon, and originates from the time of the [Franco dictatorship](#) in Spain. Following his Cold War rehabilitation amongst the western powers in the early 1950s, Franco first ordered a range of restrictions at the Gibraltar frontier in 1954, ostensibly in protest at the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to the Rock on her coronation tour. Further restrictions were imposed in subsequent years, which culminated in the total closure of land and sea traffic between Spain and Gibraltar in 1969. If Franco's aim had been to squeeze the Gibraltar economy and force its inhabitants into submission, his policy was totally self-defeating, as even his gushing British biographer, the late George Hills, was forced to admit. The border closure also solidified a nascent Gibraltarian identity, which became resolutely anti-Spanish thereafter.



Spain-Gibraltar border crossing, Credit: Lancastrian (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Whilst the transition to democracy in Spain after Franco's death eventually brought about the full reopening of the border in 1985, it is fair to say that successive Spanish democratic governments have felt obliged to follow the lead

of the dictatorship in using the frontier against Gibraltar. Media discourse in Spain also maintains a largely intransigent stance on the subject of 'El Peñón', and arguably obliges politicians of all persuasions to uphold a common stance on the subject. In July 2009, for example, former Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos was castigated in several newspapers for the 'shame' and 'historic treachery' of travelling to Gibraltar to meet his British counterpart, David Miliband, and (then) Gibraltar Chief Minister Peter Caruana. [The visit](#) was said to undermine 300 years of Spanish policy geared towards 'anti-colonialism' and the recovery of Gibraltar.

Moratinos' visit certainly did mark a change to the pattern set for Spanish policy by the late dictator in 1954. Indeed, it was a symbolic culmination of a much more flexible position adopted by the PSOE administration of José Zapatero, which had agreed to participate in trilateral talks with Britain and (for the first time) Gibraltar over matters relating to the territory. As part of these discussions, and notwithstanding a degree of suspicion or outright hostility from some quarters in both Gibraltar and Spain, frontier relations had been normalised to a great extent, agreements had been made to expand the Gibraltar airport to the potential benefit of communities on either side of the frontier, and the Gibraltar Government had invited the establishment of an Instituto Cervantes on the Rock to promote Spanish language and culture.

Quite apart from the logic of preferring carrot to stick, Zapatero's Gibraltar policy joined a long line of reforms which were sure to irritate the (then) PP opposition and highlight its political debt to Francoism: to name but a few, the legalisation of gay marriage, the passage of further powers to the autonomous communities (particularly Catalonia and the Basque Country), and the hugely controversial '[law of historical memory](#)', which attempted to address the legacies of Francoism left untouched during the transition.

Seen in this light, some degree of change in Spanish policy to Gibraltar might have been expected after the election of the Partido Popular to office in December 2011. And true to form, tensions have increased in the last 18 months. The PP has refused to engage in the 'trilateral process' begun under Zapatero. Moreover, radically different interpretations of Gibraltar's right to 'territorial waters' have led to several altercations between the Gibraltar police and their Spanish counterparts in Gibraltar Bay, culminating recently in Spanish officers [allegedly shooting](#) at a British jet-skier. Finally, as events of the past two weeks have shown, the border has once again been used to push Madrid's 'traditional' claims to the Rock. It has not been lost on Gibraltarian observers that the latest restrictions were imposed on 4 August, the day that Franco declared 'Day of Gibraltar' in 1951 to mark the loss of the territory on that date in 1713, and to mobilise Spanish public opinion against British 'occupation' of the Rock.

Contrary to accepted wisdom in Britain, Spain and Gibraltar, we must understand that the notion of Spain's 'traditional' claim to Gibraltar – and more specifically the use of the 'contentious' frontier to put pressure on the Rock – is largely a policy and narrative invented by the Franco regime. Indeed, for most of the period after 1713, the border was relatively open, official relations excellent, cross-frontier commerce considerable (both licit, and illicit in the form of a truly [Brobdingnagian](#) smuggling trade), and socio-cultural exchange the accepted norm. In one of its more bizarre manifestations, the [Royal Calpe Hunt](#), this closeness was represented for over a century by British officers (and later Gibraltarian notables) riding out with Spanish officers and aristocrats to hunt foxes in the neighbouring Spanish countryside. The kings of Britain and Spain were joint patrons of the hunt. On a larger and more significant scale, the symbiotic relationship across the frontier was confirmed and cemented by large-scale intermarriage, the predominant use of Spanish amongst civilians on the Rock, and widespread interest in Spanish culture.

Gibraltar's 'contentious' frontier also operated to solidify local loyalties, which often stood in opposition to the respective national priorities of London or Madrid. For example, many a Gibraltar governor found out to his cost that it was unwise to place British military interests on the Rock ahead of the local contraband trade, for fear of upsetting the Gibraltarian merchant community and its powerful economic allies in Britain. Similarly, when another Spanish dictator, General Miguel Primo de Rivera, attempted to enact strict customs controls on the frontier in the 1920s, Gibraltarians combined with their civilian counterparts in the surrounding Spanish towns to force a policy u-turn.

Some sense of the border's ability to blur loyalties can be seen this past week by the observation of the Spanish

[mayor of La Línea](#) that the recent frontier restrictions have harmed as many Spanish travellers and workers as they have Gibraltarian, to the detriment of an already deprived local economy and at a time of grave economic crisis. The PP's obsession with the Rock is not necessarily shared by Gibraltar's immediate Spanish neighbours, and arguably never was.

The Gibraltar 'problem' thus remains much more complex than the simplicities of a largely-Francoist narrative would allow for. In using action against Gibraltar to distract Spanish public and media attention from other internal problems – on a macro level Spain's economic woes, and on a micro level the ongoing allegations against Prime Minister Rajoy in the [Barcenas](#) scandal – the PP is arguably following a genuinely 'traditional' policy towards the Rock. If history has taught us something about this relationship, however, it is that carrot is much more effective than stick. An open frontier has served to unite the two communities for much of the last three hundred years. By contrast, frontier restrictions begun under Franco have, quite understandably, solidified a Gibraltarian identity that defines itself strongly against the Spanish 'other'.

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